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DISSENT IN ENGLAND.

ACCEPTING an invitation to say something upon this subject, I am assured I may speak freely, without any fear of being misunderstood by my American readers. This assurance is based upon the fact that in the United States there is no Established Church. Unfortunately the basis of the assurance is too narrow for all its issues. Not only are there in England "political dissenters," there are also "religious nonconformists." The latter are not necessarily the former, nor are the former necessarily the latter, though it is only fair to state that there are many who might be called politico-religious dissenters. In order to make this distribution of classes clear to American readers, it should be stated that the religious non-conformists in particular do not necessarily make a vital question of Church establishment. They object to the doctrines, creed, ceremonies, and sacerdotal professions of the Episcopal Church. Were that church disestablished to-morrow, religious non-conformity would still entertain its objections to Anglicanism as defined and insisted upon in the Book of Common Prayer. Religious non-conformists look upon that book as a compromise between popery and Protestantism ; they have carefully considered all the comments which have been made upon doubtful words, and they have given due value to the pleadings of men who, being nominally staunch Protestants, have yet given their "unfeigned assent and consent" to the doctrines in the Book of Common Prayer ; yet, having done so they feel that the plain and natural interpretation of the words of the latter lead to the conclusion that the Prayer Book is distinctly more papal than Protestant. There are many religious non-conformists in England who look upon the hierarchy as entirely inconsistent with the simplicity of the conception of the Christian Church which is given in the New Testament. They are unable to accept all the pompous and regal titles which are claimed by the clergy of vari-

ous degrees ; they are overwhelmed by such distinctions as, "Most Reverend," "Right Reverend Father," "Very Reverend," "Right Reverend Lord Bishop" of London or Winchester ; feeling that such designations are inconsistent, as I have said, with the simplicity of apostolic spirit and custom. Then again, religious non-conformists are strongly antagonistic to the sacerdotal claims which are not illogically set up by many of the English clergy. Not a few clergymen in England insist that they alone have received valid and authoritative ordination, and under this impression they reject the claims of the entire non-conformist ministry to be regarded as in any sense divinely sanctioned. The clergy now more particularly in view are not unwilling to be friendly with dissenting ministers in a non-professional capacity ; on the contrary, the personal and social manners of such clergymen are often distinguished by the highest consideration and courtesy ; but let a dissenting minister suggest that even one of the least sacerdotal clergymen should occupy a non-conformist pulpit, and conduct a non-conformist service of the simplest and least pretending kind, and the clergyman will fly off as if he had been stung by fire. The clergyman has what he calls a "professional conscience" or an "ecclesiastical conscience ;" in the keeping of this self-created conscience in his relation toward dissenters he is most fastidious, whilst many dissenters wonder how he can accommodate that same discriminating conscience to not a few of the things plainly insisted upon in the Book of Common Prayer. Religious non-conformists, not a few, are unable to accept the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England as they should be grammatically construed. Others of them think they find in the Book of Common Prayer the doctrine of regeneration by baptism. Others, again, are quite unable to accept the Burial Service, because it seems to make no discrimination between those who died in known sin and those who died as professed believers in the Lord Jesus Christ ; the Prayer Book looks upon them all as men whose resurrection to Eternal Life is assured and undisputed. Whether religious non-conformists are right in all their interpretations and inferences is not the immediate question before me ; it is enough to state as a matter of fact that such interpretations and inferences do keep out of the Church of England many who have not finally made up their minds upon the political question of Church Establishment.

On the other hand there are great numbers in England who are, in the clearest sense of the term, "political dissenters." The term has often been used as a stigma, and it has been accepted as such by those to whom it has been applied. The stigma, however, has not been regarded as an argument, nor has it, in the slightest degree, mitigated the hostility which is entertained by those who believe that the State ought not to be called upon to maintain any form of religion. Amongst the political dissenters are found not a few really earnest Christian men whose political opposition is stimulated by their simple and ardent piety. Speaking of the religio-political dissenter, I may say that he starts his argument from a distinct conception (right or wrong) which he has formed of the nature and scope of the Christian Church. He says in effect: The Church of Christ is a spiritual institution: the object of that Church is the conversion and salvation of man. Its consequent purpose or duty is the spiritual education and edification of souls: it proceeds upon a recognition of the supremacy and sovereignty of the individual conscience: under these circumstances it is not only absurd, but profane for the State—necessarily a complex body—representing all varieties of religious opinion and certainly representing many who are unbelievers in Christian doctrine—to attempt, in any form, or in any degree, to rule a distinctively spiritual institution. Religious dissenters have been shocked by the idea that Papists, Jews, Infidels, and Agnostics, should have any official part or lot in deciding affairs which belong to the Protestant branch of the Church of Christ. They are fully aware of all the interpretations and glosses which have been put upon this action, yet, in this case, as in the other, after giving full consideration to them, they cannot but feel that the Christian Church is tainted by the touch—however guarded and even generous—of an unchristian hand. The time was when payment was demanded from dissenters, as from others, in support of the Established Church of England. That time has gone by, but no credit is due to the Church itself for its expiration. For many years a desperate battle was fought about this question of church rates, and the battle ended in what may be regarded, without offense, as a victory on the non-conformist side. I allude to this fact, because it is often said that surely the Church, which has given up its claim to this species of taxation, has a right to believe and to teach and to propagate whatever it may believe to be true. In

this contention there is an obvious sophism ; any voluntary body of Christians may logically elect to stand upon this ground and its claim cannot be justly or successfully disputed. But an Established church is not a voluntary body ; it distinctly and perhaps proudly claims to be a national corporation ; it uses the national name ; its designation is nationally inclusive ; every man, therefore, in the nation has a right to protest against what he may believe to be a misuse of his name. In theory the Church of England claims every Englishman as a member. As a matter of fact, probably one-half of the English population should be reckoned as wholly outside the establishment ;—some because of distinct conscientious conviction ; some because of simple religious hostility, and others on the ground of religious indifference ; yet, still as a matter of mere statistics, there remains the fact that fully one-half of the inhabitants of England are not included in what is called the National Church. Is not this, then, plainly a contradiction in terms ? Ought a church to claim to be the whole, when it is obviously only a part ? Would the Church be content with non-conformists who describe England as a non-conformist nation ? Yet, in view of facts of the most obvious and suggestive kind the Church goes on calmly claiming to be the Church of the Nation, the Church of the whole people, and in so arrogantly ignoring facts it can hardly be wondered at that non-conformists should answer the arrogant claim with resentment not always, perhaps, well controlled or happily expressed.

The social influence of the Established Church in England is often very insidious and very baleful. Dissenters, though ostensibly recognized, often have to explain and almost to apologize for their existence. The ignorance of the common run of Church people respecting non-conformists and non-conformity is simply astounding. That there are Church of England dignitaries and others who are perfectly conversant with the whole history of non-conformity is, of course, indisputable ; but, speaking of the average Churchman, I should say that his knowledge of English dissent is of the barest possible kind. A very zealous member of the Established Church once took up a Congregational Hymn-book in my study, and having perused it a few minutes exclaimed with unfeigned astonishment : “ Why, I see here several of our hymns ! ” The hymns in question were the compositions of James Montgom-

ery, Charles Wesley, Isaac Watts, and Phillip Doddridge, yet the hymns of these historical non-conformists were quietly assumed to be "Our hymns" in the sense of the Established Church! This incident, trivial enough in itself, is quoted as indicative of an amount of ignorance which would be simply incredible to an enlightened American reader. Even where dissenters are tolerated they are seldom really understood by English Churchmen. It is next to impossible to get out of the mind of the English Churchman the impression that the dissenter is secretly bent upon robbing the Established Church. The Churchman feels convinced that if the dissenter could only possess himself of the endowments of the Church he would be quite satisfied. The Churchman may be argued down upon every point and may be put to the very humiliation of silence by logic and by fact, yet, there will linger in his mind the more or less unconscious persuasion that every dissenter is a heretic and a felon. I have hardly ever known an instance in which the average English Churchman has grasped the moral position of the English dissenter. A vicar of good standing in London lately published a pamphlet on the question of disestablishment, in the course of which he pensively inquires, "If the Church were destroyed, who would baptize your children, who would marry you, who would officiate at the interment of your deceased?" The absurdity of these inquiries would be simply farcical if they did not indicate something deeper and deadlier than themselves.

No dissenter wishes to destroy the Church. No non-conformist is seeking to limit the spiritual influence of the Anglican Church, or any of its institutions. It would appear as if the men in question were under the impression that if they were disendowed they would, of necessity, be silenced. They give the impression to those who are outside that they only preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments because they enjoy the protection and the emoluments of the State. If a Church were disestablished, what is to hinder those men preaching as zealously as ever? And if the Church were disendowed what is there to prevent those men marrying and burying people, as occasion might arise? Here again creeps in the influence of the sacerdotal argument, which leads the untrained mind to accept the sophism that nothing is religiously valid that is not sanctioned by a certain official process. Suggestions of this kind cannot but have a very

unhappy effect upon the general thinking of the Anglican community. The impression cannot always be put into words, but it affects the thought and habit and action of the religious public to an unlimited and often undefinable extent. Dissenters are everywhere regarded as the enemies of the Church, than which there can be no greater misjudgment and no greater calumny. Dissenters are among the first to recognize, in the most cordial and emphatic manner, the noble service rendered by the clergy and laity of the Church of England. Their liberality, their zeal, their sympathy with the people, their fearlessness in visiting the abodes of poverty and the abodes of disease, are all recognized with deep emotion and unfeigned gratitude by the dissenters of England. Those dissenters are filled with the conviction that if the Church of England were disestablished and disendowed, and thus put upon an apostolic basis, not one of these characteristic features need be in the slightest degree depleted of energy and beneficence. If any American readers are under the impression that English dissenters have in view the destruction of the English Church, I should be thankful if my word could be accepted that the dissenters of England only wish to liberate the Church from State bonds and not in any degree to interfere with its spiritual enthusiasm and activity.

I have spoken of the social influence of the establishment being insidious and baleful. In illustration of this opinion I may say that I had not been many days in this country until I cut out of an American paper the following announcement :

“ Here is an advertisement from an English paper :

“ ‘ To Let.—St. Katharine’s, Verulam Road. One of the prettiest residences in Hitchen. Nine rooms, cellars, large garden. £50. Dissenters not eligible. ’ ”

Let any unprejudiced man read this advertisement and say whether there is not in it a spirit calculated to sow dissension in the national mind. Three thousand miles away from the action of such a spirit, American readers may be able to contemplate the scene with equanimity, and, perhaps, with some measure of amusement. But let Americans be given to understand that the great steamships sailing from the port of New York are open to all the community, except those who belong to a certain religious persuasion—say Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians—let the Episcopalians of this country feel that anybody may

avail themselves of those ships but Episcopalians, then they will be able to express proper feeling in proper terms. Nor may this advertisement be regarded as in any degree exceptional or singular. The spirit of this advertisement penetrates English society through and through. I have known farms engaged, and the leases drawn up, and all the documents ready for signature, when a question has been asked regarding the religious position of the incoming tenant, and on its being discovered that he was a dissenter all the negotiations have been pronounced null and void. There are many villages and hamlets in England where a Wesleyan Methodist may not hold a prayer meeting, even in his own house, and this is made absolute, not by some general verbal agreement, but by definite legal covenant. Can it be wondered at, then, that it should be felt by dissenters that the social influence of the establishment is often insidious and baleful? People who suffer from the puncture of these thorns are more likely to know how sharp they are than those who look upon the suffering from a comfortable distance. There are mercantile situations in England which are not open to dissenters. There are high educational positions, as head masters and governors, that are not open to non-conformists. In this way the spirit of religious persecution is still rampant. Lord Selborne, in his recent defense of the Church of England, has pointed out the direction in which his own thoughts are running. Whilst a tolerant and eminently amiable man, yet his lordship has put it on record that, in his opinion, Mr. Gladstone is endangering the continued existence of the Church of England by inviting into his Cabinet men who have made Disestablishment an item in the new Liberal programme. Is not this religious persecution? Is not this the very spirit of the Inquisition? Is it not herein suggested that Mr. Gladstone should first ask every man eligible for a cabinet position whether he is a Churchman or a dissenter?

The advertisement in the above instance pronounces a dissenter ineligible for the tenancy of a beautiful villa; other advertisements pronounce dissenters ineligible for certain educational official positions; Lord Selborne, an ex-Lord Chancellor of Great Britain, pronounces dissenters who have the courage of their convictions ineligible for cabinet service! If this is not religious persecution the term needs to be redefined. In the face of facts of this kind it is somewhat galling to be exhorted to "let

bygones be bygones." The dissenter is perfectly willing to adopt this maxim and to follow this policy, but he rightly insists that the bygones should be gone in reality and not in pretense. The tree is not gone so long as the root remains.

Not a single concession has ever been made to English dissenters in a spontaneous and cordial manner on the part of the English Church. Church rates have been abolished, University Tests have been superseded, churchyards have been opened for the general use of the parish, and many penalties and disabilities have been swept away, but, in every instance, the action has been begun, continued, and completed by dissenters themselves. Thus the Church is being gradually disestablished in England; piece by piece the old fabric is being taken down. I cannot but regret this piecemeal disestablishment. So long as persecution was allowed to retain concrete forms and to operate in a way which could be felt without metaphysical exposition, there was hope that the people would rise in religious indignation and demand the eradication and not the mere disbranching of the evil. English dissenters, however, have acted on the policy of a gradual and almost imperceptible disestablishment, so that now the Church is brought to about the last degree of attenuation, so much so, indeed, that Churchmen are asking on every hand, "What have dissenters to complain of? what grievances have they to state? under what penalties do they suffer?" All these questions show that the interrogators have no idea of the fundamental and eternal principle upon which non-conformity takes its stand, namely, the principle of liberty of conscience and freedom of action in all matters relating to religious life and conviction. Dissenters are opposed to the idea that the State should have anything whatever to do with religion, in the way of directing, controlling, or patronizing it. It is, therefore, not a question of intolerance, persecution, or penalty, however feeble or small these may be; the question is infinitely greater, penetrating, as it does, to the very heart of things and insisting that a right conception of the Kingdom of Christ upon earth is inconsistent with political Cæsarism and worldly criticism and patronage.

It may be asked whether the opposition to the Church of England is organized, or whether it is left to the expression of

general sentiment. In reply to this inquiry I have to say that there is an institution known by the name of "Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control" which is supported by a large number of the most able and most generous British non-conformists. This Society has been in existence about forty years, and has been characterized in all its action by the highest intelligence, determination, and munificence. I am afraid, without having official records at hand, to say how much money has been contributed to the funds of this Society, but I am certain that, taking the whole period of its existence, the sum has been worthy of the great cause which the contributors have espoused. Perhaps I may speak the more freely of this Society, because I am neither a member of it nor a subscriber to its funds. The name of the Society indicates clearly that the interest of its members begins in religion, rather than in politics. When we read of a society for the emancipation of slaves we justly infer that originators and supporters of the society have studied the question of slavery, and are deeply interested in the subject of human liberty ; so, when we read of the liberation of religion, we naturally conclude that those who are interested in that service are those deeply convinced of the nature and obligation of religious doctrine and life. Such a society, therefore, I could heartily join, were its action faithful to its name. I do not join the existing society because it has not shrunk from inviting to its platform men whom I know to be merely political in their sympathies and purposes, and whom I also know to be hostile to every form of religion, whether established or non-established. I am prepared to accept the charge of being in some degree narrow-minded in this matter, but my narrow-mindedness absolutely prevents me from co-operating with men in the liberation of religion, whose often avowed object I know to be the destruction of religion. Certainly, as citizens, such men are at liberty to carry out their convictions, but they ought to be members of a society for the Liberation of the State from the control and patronage of religion. Under some such designation as this their society would be legitimate, and their relation to it would be logical, natural, and necessary. I simply point out this distinction to indicate why some Englishmen, who are zealous non-conformists, and even political dissenters, are not connected with the Liberation Society. The words "Liberation Society" are not the whole

title of the Society ; if they were, they would be perfectly sufficient to cover the whole ground ; but, from my point of view, the position which is given to " religion " in the title of the Society should prevent co-operation within the limits of that Society and under its noble watchword with men who openly live by denouncing religious doctrine and service of every kind.

Having thus delivered my mind on this matter, I am free to say that the Liberation Society is from end to end of its history inspired by an honest and lofty purpose. Its officers, its lecturers, its agents are in the overwhelming majority of instances men whom the Christian churches of England delight to honor: The Liberation Society is now acknowledged to be a political factor in contemporaneous English history. Statesmen quietly, and sometimes openly, inquire what the Liberation Society will do in such and such cases. Even conservative statesmen cannot ignore the growing power of English non-conformity in the cities, villages, and hamlets of the country. Much of this is due to the action of the Liberation Society, whose lecturers have gone everywhere expounding sound Christian doctrine with regard to Church Establishments, and circulating in great abundance literature adapted to popular use.

So much for what may be called organized opposition to the Established Church. But, beyond this, there is an opposition of what I cannot but consider a more vital and more influential character. Every non-conformist chapel is, in reality, a non-conformist argument. In nearly every village in England non-conformity makes its institutional sign. Here is the Primitive Methodist Chapel, yonder is the Congregational Chapel, further on is the Wesleyan or Presbyterian Chapel, and the very appearance of these buildings excites inquiry and stimulates discussion. For my part, I am more hopeful of influences of this kind than of influences that are critical, controversial, and openly hostile. Growth is sometimes better than attack. Sometimes men do not know exactly what course their action is taking, or to what issue it is tending, so that many who imagine themselves to be simply living a quiet Christian life, without taking any part or lot in ecclesiastical politics, are all the time doing a constructive work, the proper issue of which is the overthrow of Church Establishments, and the inauguration of a healthy religious spontaneity and independence. Many men, who would hardly allow themselves to

be called dissenters, are thus, indirectly, upholding the cause of dissent. So that, in this way and in that, some openly, some controversially, some silently, some influentially, the great work of propagating right ideas regarding the Christian Church is proceeding rapidly and surely in England.

All this I have written in no merely controversial spirit, but simply with a desire to give a frank expression to my own convictions and, I believe, to the convictions of many of the English people. If I change the point of view and look upon the Church of England with Christian eyes, I should claim to be among the foremost to recognize, as I have already said, the great work which the Church of England is doing. I can never forget the obligations of Christian England to the English Church. He would be, not only an unjust man, but utterly blind, who denies that the erudition, the zeal, the personal liberality, of the English Church are worthy of the devoutest commendation. I may be permitted to add as an English Congregational minister that probably no minister in England preaches to more English clergymen than I myself do, in connection with the noonday service held every Thursday in the City Temple, London. The personality of the reference will be forgiven for the sake of the object which I have in view, which is to indicate that on every hand I have received the broadest and kindest encouragement from clergymen of the Established Church. In speech, in writing, in published articles, they have done everything in their power to encourage me in my service. Yet, this very kindness brings into strongest contrast the point to which I have already referred, namely, that not one of these clergymen would be allowed by his bishop to preach in my pulpit. Clergymen have accepted invitations to preach there. Our arrangements have actually proceeded to the point of public advertisement. They have even gone to the very morning of the day on which the service was to be rendered, and at the eleventh hour the bishop has interposed and forbidden the fulfillment of the engagement. On two occasions, the Bishop of London has done this in my own case. Now, this is no question of Establishment or Disestablishment. This is purely an Episcopal and sacerdotal question, and the Episcopal injunction would just be as prompt and resolute as it is to-day, were Disestablishment to take place instantly.

Circumstances of this kind justify me in saying that the Estab-

lished Church question may be viewed from either of two points, either from the point of Episcopacy, amounting almost to Papacy, and from the point of political dissent or Disestablishment. Altogether the Church life of England is in a very disturbed and undesirable state. Even courtesy itself is often streaked by suspicion. The most cordial social relations are often felt to be reserved and restrained in a sense that can hardly be expressed in words. That the Church of England will be disestablished within a comparatively brief period is my firm conviction. I hope nothing will be done by violence, but that we shall accept the processes of education which, though often slow, are sure. Every Board School that is founded helps the education of society, and my conviction is that we only need larger, freer education in order to liberate men from the superstitions and fantasies which have so much to do with the maintenance of mechanical religion.

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